

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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Written Testimony of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women Before the Judiciary Committee Friday, April 1, 2005

In Support Of:

HB 6290, AAC An Act Concerning Inmate Purchases, Clothing and Visits.

HB 6961, AA Concerning a Prisoner Reentry Commission

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women thanks the committee for this opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the above-referenced proposals, which will ease visitations between young children and their incarcerated caregivers, and establish a Prisoner Reentry Commission to ensure the success of reentry strategies.

HB 6290, AAC An Act Concerning Inmate Purchases, Clothing and Visits

The PCSW supports HB 6290 because Section 3 of the proposed bill reduces barriers to frequent visits between children and incarcerated mothers. Maintaining family contact is important to the well being of children of incarcerated mothers and fathers and improves the chances for successful community re-entry when a parent's sentence is completed. The proposed bill relieves children, ages five and under, of the additional burden of being placed on witness lists or being subjected to background checks prior to being permitted to visit an incarcerated parent. It is highly unlikely that any child under the age of five poses a risk to prison staff and; therefore, should be given quick, easy and frequent access to their parent.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that in 1999 there were 53,600 mothers among state and federal prisoners¹. Among females incarcerated in state prisons, 39.2%

¹ U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. August 2000.

have one to two dependent children². 64.3% of these women served as the primary caregiver for the child prior to incarceration, compared to only 43.8 of incarcerated fathers³. Since women continue to be the primary caregiver for the children, the impact of imprisonment on women and their families can be quite difficult.

Studies show that children of inmates are often psychologically traumatized and, as a result, are five to six times more likely than their peers to be incarcerated⁴. However, evidence continues to demonstrate that continued family contact between mother and child throughout the mother's incarceration benefits both. "Ongoing communication is vital in maintaining parent-child attachment and in allowing parents to maintain their role and carry out parental responsibilities"⁵. Family support and attachment remains the most critical factor in successful reentry for offenders.

Unfortunately, many obstacles exist that make regular visitations between parent and child difficult. Restrictive rules governing visitations often lengthen the process of visiting an inmate. For the family and friends that unexpectedly take over as caregiver for an imprisoned woman's child, it can require too much time to take the children to prison or jail to visit the mother. Therefore, the parent-child connection can often dwindle and put the family at risk for an unsuccessful reunification, as well as recidivism on the part of the offender.

HB 6961, AA Concerning a Prisoner Reentry Commission.

The PCSW supports HB 6961 and the concept of having a Commission consisting of multiple agencies addressing varying issues facing prisoners upon reentry. We would like to highlight the fact that some of the issues pertaining to women's reentry into society following incarceration are different than those facing men and request that the proposed Prisoner Reentry Commission consider these differing needs. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1,548 women were incarcerated in Connecticut prisons in 2003⁶. As many as 48.9 % of these women have not finished high school⁷. Also, due to the fact that far more women live in poverty than do men, women often get involved in the use and sale of drugs, with 35% of women in state prisons being there for drug offenses compared to only 23% of male prisoners⁸.

The issues that many women leaving prison face often involve sexual or domestic violence, the need for substance abuse and mental health treatment, and reassuming family responsibilities. Given the nature of these issues, women need gender and culturally appropriate treatment and planning when reentering society. Therefore, we

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rierden, Andi. *For Women Offenders: More Sanctions and Fewer Prison Sentences*.

⁵ Hairston, C.F. "Family ties during imprisonment: Important to whom and for what?" *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. 1991. pp87-102.

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Prisoners in 2003*. November 2004.

⁷ CT Department of Corrections – *Research York Inmates Confined January 1, 2002, Last grade completed (Self-reported)*

⁸ U.S. Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. August 2000

request that the PCSW or some other group with expertise in women's issues be appointed to the proposed Commission on Prisoner Reentry.

Thank you.

